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NEW YORK AND LONDON

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Imagining Cuba: Storytelling and the Politics of Exile

MYRA MENDIBLE

Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other . . . Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element . . . not comfortable but home.

—Gloria Anzaldua

For those of us accustomed to navigating the fluid borders dividing our "Cuban" and "American" cultural identities, the condition of being both and neither at the same time is indeed not comfortable but home. We are, in Gustavo Perez Firmat's catchy phrase, "born in Cuba, made in the U.S.A." We are members of that group referred to as the "one-and-a-half" generation, a designation that attempts to capture the "in-between" status of *cubanos/as* who emigrated to the States as children or adolescents and have lived, as Firmat calls it, "on the hyphen." I am Cuban-American, exile, refugee, naturalized citizen, ethnic, immigrant, *gusana*.¹ To native-born Americans, I am simply Cuban; to Cubans on the island, I am too *Americanized* to be genuinely Cuban. The "in-betweens" cohabit two or more identities at once; we are insiders/outsiders, both Cuban and American and yet neither simultaneously. Our stories resonate with different languages, cultures, and subjectivities, producing oblique glimpses of a world where personal and collective memories collide and co-exist. We navigate waters as turbulent and treacherous as the Caribbean Sea itself, but they are our waters and our familiar shores bordering the distance.

This chapter registers my attempts to chart a course through these treacherous waters, to make sense of the passionate polarities that have divided Cubans on the island from Cubans in Miami for decades. In many ways, it is about the difficulty of establishing a grounded identity in a public space that reverberates with the high-pitched ideological conflict between Havana's and Miami's vociferous elites. But just as importantly, it is about the power of storytelling to reshape images of self and community in ways that can

transcend factionalism or discord. Storytelling is here imagined as a creative and constructive force for change—as a political act. Given the intensity of debates dividing U.S. Cubans from Cubans on the island on such issues as the U.S. embargo, the challenge to locate and pursue an elusive thread of connection between us is no less urgent today than it was in 1959, when Castro's revolution triggered the Cuban diaspora. Many of the "in-between" generation remain separated from Cubans on the island by a sea of silence, and from each other by misunderstanding, frustration, hostility, or indifference. I have heard fellow Cubans in the U.S. dissociate themselves from "Miami Cubans" and Cubans in Miami denigrate *marielitos*.² I have seen the images through which Cubans in the U.S. are gazed and judged, and have encountered the distortions and prejudices these images support. In this chapter I attest to the formative role that storytelling plays, hoping to reclaim at least one voice in a chorus of voices silenced by the very people who presume to speak for me and for all Cuban exiles.

Growing up in Miami, the Mecca of most Cuban exiles, I learned to understand the nuances of exile politics and thus to negotiate a place for myself. For much of my early life, I was oblivious to the petty divisions and antagonisms that could turn "insiders" into outcasts. As one of over two million Cuban immigrants who settled in the South Florida area following the Revolution, I was raised a mere ninety miles away yet a world apart from my homeland. Growing up Cuban in a U.S. city where Cubans are in the majority meant that I could be an insider, could feel at home anywhere in Miami where my food was served and my language spoken. It meant that while I was part of a minority by national standards, I grew up as just one of the family in Cuban Miami, spared many petty prejudices that minorities often face. As a teen, I was adept at crossing borders, at being both the *cubanita* next door and an Americanized young woman who loved rock music, went braless, and straightened her hair. My friends and I spoke our own hybrid tongue, the *Spanglish* that even American girls in Miami learned to use in intimate chatter. Only later, in my adult travels beyond the city's borders, would I recognize the mutability and relativity of that "insider" status: I did not have to go far to become the outsider, an object of suspicion or curiosity. I could travel a mere hundred miles south or north or west of Miami and encounter looks that said "go back where you came from." Yet these markers were more fluid still: during a return visit to Cuba, I was shocked to discover that I was an outsider in the land of my birth as well.

As a carryover of my Cuban heritage, family stories were fundamental to the formation of my identity. Kept alive in exile, they shaped and sustained certain values, forged a communal and individual sense of self, and transmitted a vision of the past that helped guide me towards the future. Growing up Cuban in Miami meant that my birthplace remained a living memory. It was alive on the streets of *calle ocho* in Little Havana, in the language we spoke at

home, and in the stories that nurtured my childhood. We had fled Cuba just two months after Fidel Castro and his Revolutionary Army occupied Havana, settling in Miami for what my parents regarded as a brief sojourn. Year after year, my mother safeguarded our property titles in a small metal box, convinced that someday we would reclaim the life left behind. My father's loss was less tangible; his memory served as his metal box, and it stored a wealth of stories rich in detail and drama. Years of exile never faded my father's memories of home. Although his gratitude to our adopted land was unquestionable, my father never forgot his first love. He yearned for her, idealized and idolized her, held her in his memories. She was *his* Havana. Eyes full of emotion, he called her "the Paris of the Caribbean," his graceful, exuberant city that never slept. He knew every nook and cranny of her, and she clung to his senses—her vibrant rhythms, pleasant and familiar smells, sultry breezes, and gentle sun.

It is therefore not surprising that my father loved recounting incidents from his life in Havana. Recalled in exile, these tales assumed for me the status of myth: they were about a place I did not remember, about a birthplace I had left as a child and could only envision as a set of characters and settings described in my father's stories. Later I would realize that as entertaining as his tales were for their drama and colorful detail, they were also instructive, helping to instill a sense of pride in me for who I am and where I come from. They also provided glimpses of a man I did not know—for my father the construction worker in Miami was not the picaresque protagonist of his tales. Like many children of his generation, my father grew up poor and without much formal schooling. As one of thirteen children, he was literally dancing for his food by the age of twelve, spinning a mean Charleston for the rich American tourists who frequented the local racetrack. My father loved retelling the story about the American major league team owner who had insulted him by disdainfully tossing a penny into his tip box. The wiry boy had looked defiantly at the man in the white suit, taken the coin out from among the pile of bills and tossed it back with equal disdain. On a personal level, this story was to teach me about dignity in the face of prejudice, humiliation, or insult. But exile would infuse even this most personal event with cultural significance: my father would come to represent Cuba itself—defiant, proud, and staunchly independent in the face of its rich and powerful neighbor to the north. Thus would the personal blend into the political, and thus did his stories bestow a vision of both the man and the country I would not otherwise know.

Other stories described his life as a child of the city, a boy nourished as much by the sights and sounds of Havana's nightlife as by the local *fondas* (eateries) that often provided free meals. Havana fed his love of music and dance, as there were always impromptu gatherings where tabletops became conga drums and work-weary men and women came alive to the rhythms of rumba or *guaguancó*. During these street gatherings, social and racial distinctions dissolved in communal celebration: hard-edged factory workers might recite

poetry to the strains of a Spanish guitar while teary-eyed old women puffed contentedly on their husbands' cigars; the young could be initiated into a Cuban ritual through the "Guantanamera," a ballad-style melody comprised of a traditional refrain interspersed with improvised verses. My father told how by joining the circle of adults, he learned to compose his own lyrics on cue and thus participate in a communal song that had endured for generations. To me, these tales of home provided a personalized history that countered the less forgiving, sometimes hostile images later reflected by my public world. To my father, storytelling was the only way he knew to cross the boundaries of time and place, to unite me—his Americanized *cubanita*—with her heritage and her birthplace.

My parents would never set eyes on their homeland again, but both kept their respective metal boxes intact: *mami* sifting through her faded titles as a way to retain her dignity during years as a hotel maid on Miami Beach, *papi* sorting out tales to impress and instruct his increasingly alien offspring. Growing up elsewhere—away from the "home" I knew only through pictures, legal documents, and stories—I came to understand that my mother's obsession with property titles and my father's preoccupation with storytelling shared a purpose. My parents' "metal boxes" were meant to safeguard my inheritance, the legacy they hoped I would claim. Each contained the only assets my parents believed they could offer: *mami's* promised the financial security that eluded them as immigrants; *papi's* offered a history I would not otherwise learn. In the end, my mother's tangible assets would prove the more illusory and immaterial, while my father's stories served as a lifeline to the Cuban half of my identity. These shared memories fostered in me the sense that I belonged to a colorful, sometimes dysfunctional, sometimes extraordinary extended family. That storytelling was more than an entertaining pastime—that it served to unite generations of displaced and fractured communities across time—was a history lesson that I would learn later. I would realize that my father's stories were meant to safeguard not only our family's but an entire culture's history in exile.

History and memory share much the same function in shaping community: both employ imagination and experience to look into the past; both are subject to revision; and both are indispensable in forging and maintaining connections to the past and to each other. My concept of history does not here refer to those authorized and fact-based reconstructions of the past that I studied in school, but to the body of communal and personal memories transmitted through time and subject to reinterpretation and reinvention. This conception of history is certainly more fluid and tricky, more tangential, anarchic, and subjective. Yet it is no less powerful in its didactic significance or formative function. Recounted and remembered, events are "kept alive" and granted authenticity (if not accuracy); the past is given shape, accorded value, and preserved. Through this sharing of memories and telling of stories, we

redefine our sense of community and foster our connection through blood and history. Given the primacy of storytelling in the formation of national identity, it is not surprising that competing groups tinker with the past to fashion more positive, self-serving stories based on history but creatively embellished by memory. As historian Charles Maier points out, memory "mingles private and public spheres . . . [and] conflates vast historical occurrences with the most interior consciousness."³ This fusion of public and private history articulates aspects of Cuban exile group identity and contains the seeds for both discord and solidarity. It is a richly textured and polyvalent voice indeed that speaks to us through these collective memories, a chorus of conflicting stories that deny us the comfort of tidy, official History.

So it was that as a teen growing up in Miami, I identified with the Cuban exile community. I shared the memories of loss that haunted my parents and other Cuban-born adults. I understood the rage, the mourning, the painful longing that fueled public protests and other expressions of Cuban exile identity. I moved between this familial world defined by exile and the world I shared with my American friends, who regarded my family's preoccupation with politics with curious bewilderment. They could not understand why so many Cubans in Miami did not simply *move on*, live in the present as Americans, and shed their obsession with Cuba's past and with Fidel Castro. How could they know that lives had been forever changed and a people radically divided by events in 1959? How could they relate to the passionate displays of patriotism and fiery rhetoric that shaped Cuban exile politics in Miami? To the inhabitants of the world outside this exile enclave, politics had very little to do with daily life, while to me, it was intimately personal. In my familial world, Castro's latest words or deeds informed dinner conversations and news flashes about Cuba sparked impromptu street demonstrations or heated arguments among friends and family. In my home away from home, Cuba was always an absent presence, the subject of gossip exchanged over *café cubano* at the ubiquitous coffee stands and the object of passionate emotions vented on local radio talk shows and news editorials. It was a world where the butcher bore the scars of torture endured during twenty years as a political prisoner and my neighbor's brother had been executed by a pro-Castro firing squad. This was not a world where politics was just about an occasional election.

An exile community's historical consciousness is deepened by two kinds of experience: direct participation in the events or emotional engagement through oral testimonies, memoirs, autobiographies, familial lore, and imagination. Since I left Cuba at the age of five, I possessed few memories born of my own reality. Instead, I relied on the many stories I remembered, the diverse people I met who shared their private memories of Cuba's past. At home and on the street, I heard stories fueled by rage and disappointment. In those stories, Cuba was a nation violated—her people scattered, oppressed, imprisoned, executed, or lost at sea. She was the Republic whose possibilities

had been cut short by *comunistas*, by traitors and despots. Later, my university studies offered other versions as well. If conditions in Cuba were so ripe with potential; if the island had sustained a healthy, vibrant economy; if there was little evidence of discontent—then why did the Revolution happen? To my adult mind, my father's stories seemed unreliable, like memories filtered through the eyes of a lover. I began to question contradictions, inconsistencies, partial truths. I longed to know "the real story."

For my vision of Cuba was always filtered through multiple lenses, each casting doubt on the other and evoking conflicting emotions and conclusions: shifting my perspective from Cuban to American or vice versa could destabilize any conviction or cast doubt on any opinion. Personal histories avowed in private circles crumbled under public scrutiny, as newspaper and television accounts often contrasted with local images of self and community. Like others of the "in-between" generation, my knowledge of Cuban history stemmed from secondary, often contradictory sources. It was mediated by my parents and later filtered through an educational system that measured Cuban history only in relation to its own cultural myths and perspectives. On those rare occasions when Cuba was mentioned during my formal schooling, it was as a representative Communist Other to Democratic America—as an island nation defined by loss and lack. Cuba's complex history, filtered through this narrow lens, served to affirm the virtues of capitalism or to admonish young Americans who may be lured by pop culture images of el Che or Fidel. The U.S. stood as an example of democracy and justice defined against its Other: Latin America. Understandably, my view of Cuba from that perspective was that it had always been a "banana republic," its history simply a string of strongmen dictators, racists, and regressive initiatives. In this version, Cuba's long war for independence from Spain is named the "Spanish-American War," obscuring the fact that a generation of Cubans, led by a military *leadership* comprised of 40 percent Afro-Cubans, paid for that victory with their own blood. This script calls for the U.S. to play enlightened democracy to Cuba's "Third World" role. It ignores the U.S. government's role in imposing their own segregationist policies on Cuba's military during its occupation, and neglects to mention the fact that unlike the U.S.'s War of Independence, Cuba's articulated a vision of racial equality and harmony.

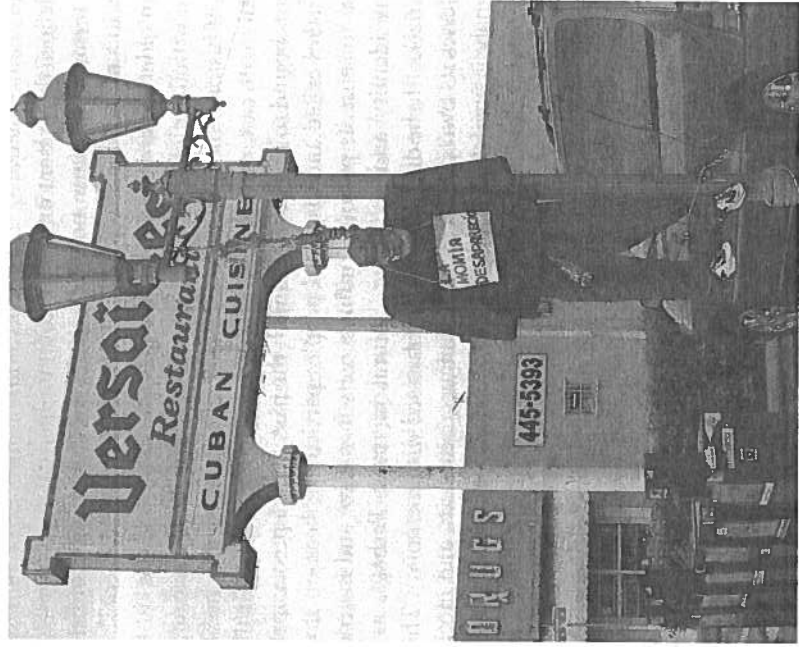
Yet for years I felt destined to carry these remnants of a tattered and honored heritage like an albatross around my neck.⁴ Stuart Hall's remark that identity is never stable but is "subject to the play of history and the play of difference" suggests that identity is an ongoing process of identification and association. In this sense, my *cubanidad* became as much a political choice as a question of birthplace or native language. But it was a choice implicated by the stories and memories I internalized as my own—personal and cultural narratives born of family lore, historical events, hearsay, and personal experiences. Historical memory nurtures our sense of belonging: it fosters connection and

kinship, a shared vision of an imagined home place that is indispensable in shaping personal and national identity. But Cuban exiles and their bicultural sons and daughters carry the fragments of a shattered history like baggage. Forty-six years of migration and separation have eroded and confused our memories, leaving gaps, absences, and conflicting images, each account filtered through personal experience or perspective. At the same time, we hear voices proclaiming their authority to dictate our memories, to view the entirety of a collective past through narrow and myopic lenses focused on the speaker's own interests. Often, these interests conflict with our own experiences or distort images of self and community. We cling to a thread of connection even as we feel our grasp slipping with each negative depiction of Cubans or each public incident of intolerance among our own people. Like many of my generation of Cubans raised in the U.S., I have regarded my ancestry with mixed feelings, torn between a need to reject the identity conjured by these dominant perspectives and a desire to connect to my heritage without shame. Indeed, as Margaret Ferguson has remarked, exile is "the metaphorical name for the experience of ambivalence."⁵

Exile defines the present only in relation to the past; it perceives "the world always in terms of relations: nostalgia, the fictional recreation of better times in relation to a negative reading of the present."⁶ This predicament sheds some light on an older generation of Cuban exiles who confound the "in-between" generation with their inability to act upon the present. Many are caught in this labyrinth of history where all paths lead to the past and there is no exit to the present. Any vote cast, and position taken, any alliance formed in the United States seems bound to this obsession with the past. Such a preoccupation with the past makes exiled and displaced peoples particularly keen on storytelling. They seem to sense its profound influence, its formative and instructive role in shaping identity and recording cultural memory. Perhaps, as Michael Ugarte remarks, "to be displaced is to be obsessed with memory."⁷ The story of exile expresses its own poetic, "its own language, conceits, and motivations." Ugarte's analysis suggests that regardless of specific context, exile's voice records the experiences of loss, absence, separation, and fragmentation that seem to characterize the migratory experience. Most significantly, exile gives rise to a polemic that "brings into play a series of ideological and historical disputes whose battle ground includes the new home as well as the old."⁸

In the context of Cuban politics and discourse, Cuba's complex history is reduced to a polemic between pro-Castro/anti-Castro scenarios. This dichotomy, which Francisco Valdes aptly locates in elitist Miami and Cuba factions, is founded on contrasting versions of the past.⁹ It rejects complexity in favor of a singular and myopic vision. Each side constructs a notion of *cubanidad* founded on imagined communities past and present. The dueling factions in Miami and Havana have instigated and fueled hostility among Cubans since the ascension of "Fidelismo" in 1959 and the subsequent influx of Cuban

refugees to the U.S. Both sets of elites have constructed unilateral and ossified versions of Cuban history that support their respective agendas. On the island, the circles of power that regulate all aspects of life, the government and the party, have dictated and disseminated Cuba's official story. These elites cultivate a romantic image of themselves as heroic Davids slaying—or at least defying—the menacing Goliath of the North. From this perspective, Cubans who emigrated after Fidel's 1959 triumph are labeled *gusanos*, worms who greedily abandoned the homeland in favor of U.S. capitalism. Miami's elites, on the other hand, encompass a loose assemblage of business leaders and politicians who have amassed wealth or position in the U.S. and wield it to promote their own agendas. They are in direct opposition to Havana's elites, and as a group, express an interest in "freedom" and "democracy" only to the extent that these remain abstracted enough to serve their own aims. Both factions have cloaked themselves in nationalistic fervor to invoke their cause and monopol-



This effigy of Fidel Castro, photographed by the author on a recent visit to Miami, serves as visual testament to the endurance of stories shaping politics and culture in Cuban Miami

ize political power, and both have resorted to disinformation, suppression, intimidation, and even violence to control their constituencies.

Of course, both sides disseminate and validate their version of Cuban history. On this side of the Cuban divide, Cuba's history reads like an echo of Milton's "Paradise Lost," while on the other, present-day Cuba emerges as "Paradise Found" when compared to selective memories of Batista and *yanqui* imperialism. Both sides have continued to insist on the authenticity of "their" story, rejecting any reconfiguration of Cuban identity that might destabilize or challenge their authority. While these polarized and stalemated speakers have set the tone of Cuban political and social discourses in Miami and Havana, neither represents the actual and complexly diverse communities they profess to care so much about. Instead, each side has constructed self-serving notions of *cubanidad* founded on imagined communities past and present. Cuban exiles that cling to this singular vision memorialize the pre-1959 past as the moment of solidarity and communality, and only insiders to this vision may share its glory. Miami's elites have been granted access to the U.S.'s political machinery, and they have wielded their influence by financing pro-embargo campaigns and "representing" the Cuban exile community on the national stage. *Their* opinions on everything from the embargo against Cuba to whether six-year-old Elian should stay in the U.S. are the ones televised on national news programs, *their* views are held up by the media as representing "the Cuban exile community" or "Miami's Cuban community." It is no wonder that many Cubans of my generation have moved away from Miami and dissociated themselves entirely from the identity essentialized as "Miami Cuban." The easy identification I felt growing up among fellow Cubans could have dissolved in the face of these camps.

But many of the "in-between" generation occupy the interstices between these elites' conflicting narratives. We have rejected the inflammatory rhetoric on both sides of the Cuban border and sought to reconcile the opposing historical perspectives these represent. For me, the many stories I remember and the memories I keep in my own "metal box" have helped to humanize the most easily demonized. They have helped to soften even the most embarrassing public displays of *cubanidad*. The stories I long to hear do not aim to produce a coherent narrative of Cuban identity; nor do they gloss over the ugly aspects of our collective history or supplant them with idealized patriotic musings. Thus I keep listening, knowing that for every story of vengeance there is another of reconciliation. As Cubans struggling to come to terms with our differences and yet longing for connection, we can live with this ambiguity. In fact, we can make it home.

Myra Mendible is Professor of Literature, Cultural Theory, and Ethnic/Gender Studies at Florida Gulf Coast University. She has published widely in peer-reviewed journals and is the editor of an anthology ironically titled, *From*

Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture, published by University of Texas Press in 2007.

Notes

- 1 A derogatory term for those who emigrated from Cuba after Fidel's 1959 takeover. Literally translates as "worms."
- 2 Another derogatory reference, in this case against those who migrated to the U.S. as part of the 1981 Mariel boatlift. Castro forced boat captains to include some criminals and mentally disabled people onboard the vessels carrying family members out of Cuba.
- 3 C. S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 149.
- 4 The protagonist in Samuel Coleridge's poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is compelled to tell everyone he meets the story of his crime against nature, for which he is forced to wear a dead albatross around his neck.
- 5 Margaret Ferguson, "The Exile's Defense: Dubellay's La Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Francoise," *PMLA* 93:2 (March 1977): 277.
- 6 Michael Ugarte, "Luis Cernuda and the Politics of Exile," *MLN* 101:2 (March 1986): 327.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., 326.
- 9 Francisco Valdes, "Diaspora and Deadlock, Miami and Havana: Coming to Terms with Dreams and Dogmas," *Florida Law Review* 55 (January 2003).

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